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Representing the 54th New York Senate District



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A column from State Senator Pam Helming

Let Girls Play: Protect Girls Sports and Opportunities

by Senator Pam Helming

As a new school year approaches, I want to share something that’s happening in New York. In May, the State Education Department proposed a new gender-neutral rule for school sports. If approved by the Board of Regents in September, it would mandate that schools allow boys to participate on girls teams when there is not an equivalent boys team. For example, about 600 schools in New York have girls volleyball teams, while less than 300 have boys volleyball teams.

Right now, girls can play on boys teams and boys can play on girls teams, if they meet eligibility requirements. Schools are allowed to consider whether letting a boy participate on a girls team would have “a significant adverse effect” on girls’ opportunities. Basically, they decide if giving a boy a spot on the team would take away a girl’s chance to play.

The proposed new rule eliminates the significant adverse effect standard. Schools would no longer be able to consider the impact on girls and would be forced to let boys join girls teams without restriction. We can’t let this happen. We must preserve the integrity of girls sports.

Title IX has granted generations of girls and young women, including me and my daughter, the chance to participate in middle, high school and collegiate sports. These athletic experiences help girls build confidence, learn teamwork and develop leadership skills that serve them throughout their lives. For some, it opens doors to college opportunities they may not have had otherwise.

Forcing schools to allow male athletes to join female sports teams undermines the progress we've made for female student-athletes. It takes away local control from school districts, and the voice of parents, coaches and school boards.

The Education Department's attempt to make things equal could actually lead to inequity for all female athletes. Inclusion will lead to exclusion. Our daughters, granddaughters and nieces will lose opportunities.

Think about it. Female athletes throughout our state could find themselves competing for roster spots with males, many of whom are bigger, stronger or faster, giving them a measurable competitive advantage. Is that the goal?

Imagine if boys could now play on the girls flag football team, one of the fastest-growing high school sports. New York is the eighth state to offer girls flag football as a varsity sport, and just this year, the New York State Public High School Athletic Association named high school girls flag football a state championship sport.

This amended rule also raises serious safety concerns. Allowing males to participate in female sports, especially contact sports, could increase the risk of injury for female athletes during competition. We have already seen this happen in other states.

Why should a girl lose her spot on the field hockey team simply because a boy wants to play?

In seeking to level the playing field, the State Education Department is actually turning the playing field on its head.

On September 9-10, the Board of Regents will meet to vote on this new rule. If it's accepted, the rule will take effect on September 25, 2024.

If you want to share your opinion on this proposal with your representative on the Board of Regents, you can contact 7th Judicial District Regent Adrian Hale at Regent.Hale@nysed.gov.

I stand with our girls.

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